

Metropolitan King County Council

District 11 Issue Update



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District 11

Fall of 1998 was a busy time for the Metropolitan King County Council. Since so much happened, I thought I would take a moment to recap my two major legislative victories on your behalf.

1999 King County Budget: Balancing Regional Needs

This year the Council struggled more than ever to balance many competing interests. In October, the King County Executive sent the Council a budget for 1999 which introduced many new programs and expenditures but also cut \$1.9 million in human services funding and still required a property tax increase of 5.5% in 1999. As your Councilmember, this presented me with a particularly difficult dilemma. Throughout my service on both the Bellevue City Council and the King County Council, I have continually worked with constituents on property tax reform. Yet, I also know that the Eastside places a high value on providing a strong safety net for the more fragile members of our community. For me, this meant in order to cut property taxes and still find money to fund needed human service programs the Council would have to dig deeper into the King County budget than ever before.

First, I want to share a few thoughts about the property tax debate. As you may know, in 1997, the voters of Washington state passed Referendum 47 which requires counties and cities to identify a substantial need and take a public vote if they are going to increase property taxes by a rate higher than the Implicit Price Deflator (IPD). The IPD is one of several national inflation gauges and is currently calculated at .85%. In essence, the Council either had to cut almost \$9 million from the Executive's proposed budget or identify a substantial need that justified exceeding .85%. After many weeks of deliberations, Councilmember Greg Nickels, chairman of our budget committee, presented the Council with a revised budget that restored \$1.9 million in human services funding, reduced the property tax increase to 4.85% and identified our growing criminal justice costs as the substantial need.

But I felt we could still cut taxes further. I and several of my colleagues pushed to reduce the property tax rate to the local inflation rate of 3%. We felt this was a much more realistic projection of the inflation in expenses that King County will incur in 1999. Unfortunately we were not able to get eight votes for this proposal. Ultimate negotiations by Councilmembers Louise Miller, Brian Derdowski and myself resulted in a compromise rate of 4.5%. **This is the lowest property tax rate King County has used in over twenty years.** Most importantly, we have written a financial forecast which plans for King County government to reduce its reliance on property taxes by aiming for 4% in 2000 and 3.5% in 2001. In 1999, I will chair the budget committee and I plan to continue our 1998 work on property tax reform.

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With all of this work to reduce the property tax rate, we were still able to fund important King County and Eastside programs including:

- ☑ We added 50 police officers in the Sheriff's Department.
- ☑ We passed a \$290 million road construction plan for the next six years.
- ☑ We restored the Executive's \$1.9 million human services funding cut.
- ☑ We provided a \$1.5 million contribution for the new Bellevue Art Museum.
- ☑ We restored over \$400,000 for King County parks maintenance.

In short, I believe the 1999 King County budget is fiscally responsible, makes good progress on property tax reform and recognizes that King County is a regional government with growing regional needs that will have to be met to keep our neighborhoods safe and our communities moving.

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Lobbying Disclosure Legislation Passes

In 1968, a group of citizens banded together and wrote the King County Charter. In doing this they transformed King County government from a government run by three elected commissioners into a dynamic, responsive government with a legislative, executive, and judicial branch. With this new form of government, the public also asked for more accountability and information about its elected representatives. Over the ensuing years, King County government has adopted ordinances guaranteeing public access to all documents, enacting an ethics code, and regulating financial contributions to election campaigns. But these 30 years of government reform were missing one major component—**full disclosure and registration of those who lobby us!**

In January of 1996, when I began my first of two terms as Chair of the Metropolitan King County Council, I promised that I would do one thing—*make the Council more understandable, accessible, and accountable to the citizens it serves*. During my tenure as Chair, I did that. The Metropolitan King County Council now publishes on a quarterly basis, our attendance records, our expense requests and our voting records. But I also promised that I would bring lobbying disclosure to King County government.

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Well, it took almost three years of work but on November 9th of this year, the Council passed a lobbying disclosure ordinance. The new rules are aimed only at either those who are paid to lobby the Council or professional grass roots lobbying campaigns which spend more than \$10,000 in a consecutive 12 month period. It will not have a chilling effect on citizen contact with their elected officials. The law now requires the following:

- Professional paid lobbyists must register and file quarterly reports.
- Companies or special interest groups that employ a lobbyist must file annual reports on their activities.
- A professional grass roots lobbying campaign must name the people managing the campaign and disclose all persons who have donated more than \$100 in money or services to the effort.

In putting this ordinance together, I also realized there are certain types of activity which it would be inappropriate for King County to regulate. The following are the activities exempted from this law:

- citizen lobbyists who lobby without compensation do not have to register;
- technical experts who provide information to the council do not have to register unless they continue this activity for more than six days in a quarter;
- interest groups which communicate with their membership to explain a piece of legislation or to urge their membership to contact councilmembers; and
- officials and employees of governments do not have to register unless, they are also designated as a lobbyist.

These new disclosure requirements will take effect once the Council has approved the final administrative rules and procedures. **Over the last decade the public has routinely said “Show me the money!” This lobbying disclosure legislation will do just that.**